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Can a Christian become a Theosophist?

ORTHODOX Christianity is not allowed, it seems, to occupy the field of religion and morals unchallenged. On all sides it is being sharply held up by dissentients, who dispute its supremacy. Shall we turn a deaf ear to the summons and pass proudly on, secure in our own integrity? Surely not. For not unfrequently the appeal is a cry of distress, a call for help; and our faith stands not to lose, but to gain, by standing to its guns in justification.

One of the most vigorous of these challenging cults is Theosophy, evidence of whose vitality abounds on every hand. When Madame Blavatsky died she is said to have left 100,000 adherents, and it had only then just begun to find its feet. At the present day it invades our family circles, is solemnly discussed in popular novels, is represented by many a score of solid books, and is even at times patted approvingly on the back by serious theologians. Now, the inquiry we are urgently compelled to make to-day is this: Can the claims of Theosophy be substantiated? Are they true or false? Some, no doubt, will airily dismiss it as a bit of pure invention, in which the Prince of Darkness is directly concerned. But assertion is not argument, and condemnation is not conclusive. It will be fairer, I think, to investigate and weigh, and, looking at both sides, proceed judicially to pass a reasoned verdict. And this we will try to do in our article.

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It will probably be known to many of my readers that Theosophy claims to possess a very ancient lineage. Resuscitated by Madame Blavatsky, this "Ancient Wisdom," as she calls it, had flowed on like an underground river from the earliest times, and, emerging in Thibet, where the adepts had kept it under observation, had been imparted to her in all its primeval purity. One wonders why this Russian lady should have been so particularly chosen as the prophetess of the New

Theosophy—this world-wanderer, who seems to have been “everything by turns, and nothing long,” and in whose career and character her best friends are obliged to confess to much frailty. In all faiths the founder or prophet is bound to count for something, and if the channel be faulty we cannot be quite sure of the purity of the stream. Having been made the recipient of all this resuscitated ancient truth, Madame Blavatsky naturally proceeded to write it in her books, “Isis Unveiled” and “Secret Doctrine.” Packed full of quotations of all sorts and sizes from all ages, principally from occult authors, she sent them forth as the authorized textbooks of Theosophy. It is interesting to read of the genesis of these ponderous volumes given by her devoted, yet candid, disciple, Colonel Olcott: “We sat at opposite sides of one big table. Her pen would be flying over the page, when she would suddenly stop, look out into space with the vacant eye of the clairvoyant, shorten her vision as if to look at something held invisibly in the air before her, and begin copying on her paper what she saw.” But this was the least wonderful feature of the books, for he tells us, too, that some parts were written when she was asleep by a Master who “wrote many folio pages for her.”

Of course, the inevitable society was formed for a systematic propaganda, a few stanch believers banding themselves together in the year 1875 as students of this occult and profound philosophy in the United States of America. Its growth was slow and chequered. Its appeal fell on deaf ears. At one time its little light went almost out. The spirit of division crept in, and when Madame Blavatsky died the society split into two or three, each of them claiming to possess the mantle of the foundress. It never, somehow, lacked talent, and probably no system of thought has claimed so many eloquent pens—from Madame Blavatsky to Mrs. Besant (captured from Materialism)—to explain its tenets and proclaim its glories. In its early years the society dabbled largely in Spiritualism, although later it cut out that plank of its platform, accounting spiritualistic phenomena as undoubtedly true, but just as undoubtedly

dangerous, and therefore not to be commended as a practice to convinced Theosophists. The occult, however, has always been dear to it, and in its early years was its chief attraction. Indeed, among the powers conferred on Madame Blavatsky by the friendly Thibetan Mahatmas were found some exceedingly expressive and startling phenomena, such as materializing butterflies, money, knives, photographs, and even water-colours (with Windsor and Newton's label upon the tubes or pans). Mysterious letters fell from nowhere, purporting to proceed from the Mahatmas themselves. It was these and other occult powers which led the Psychical Research Society to send an agent to India to investigate and report. And this was done and published in their Transactions (vols. iii. and ix.), to the effect that, at least, three of Madame Blavatsky's phenomena were fraudulent. It is only fair, however, to note that the Theosophist champions deny the truth of their investigator's findings.

My readers will not resent, I think, this historical survey when they consider that no movement can be fairly estimated apart from its beginnings, growth, and culminations. Even a plant cannot be rightly known unless the study of the life-history be conjoined to the study of its flower. This is why I have recalled the Thibetan Mahatmas, their secret whisperings, the imparted tricks to impress the unbeliever, the first staggering footsteps of the new-born society, its early eclipses, and the present developed system summoning the world to its feet.

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Now, permit me to say at once that the morality of Theosophic teaching is unquestioned, and probably some have been surprised that so pure a life is demanded in what they have deemed so heretical a system. So it is only fair to emphasize its coincidence with Christianity in much of its teaching. It is on the ground of this partial coincidence that Theosophy spreads its arms so wide, and invites all faiths so confidently to shelter under its broad wings: "Christians, Buddhists, Confusianists, Moslems, retain your faiths, and become

Theosophists. We are tolerant of all. We have room for all." For do they not claim that all religions spring from one great Divine reservoir—the ancient wisdom—and that Theosophy is that original and common source where all faiths meet?

And so we find the Theosophist agreeing with the Christian on the question of man's essentially *spiritual nature*. Man has a body, and is a spirit. The physical is just a sheath, a wrapping, a temporary vestment to the spirit, which is Divine. The agreement extends of course, too, to the fact of *immortality*. Death simply opens the cage to let the prisoner loose, to sing his song of thanksgiving in the free heavens. Spirit can never die. Necessarily, too, there must be *another life*, another sphere into which the released spirit can soar or drop. There is a Theosophic heaven and a Theosophic hell, of a sort. As, too, in Christianity, and in all the leading faiths, so in Theosophy, the future depends largely on the past, this life being the factory, so to speak, for the next. A man may make his fortune here or mar it. The die is made here for the impression and stamp there. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Neither do we diverge on the vital necessity of pure *thought*. "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he," says the Scripture. To a Theosophist "thoughts are things." Thought is the great weaver to make a shroud or a wedding-dress. Heaven and hell are just the thrown-off products of the busy brains of men. In both Christianity and Theosophy there is a vigorous insistence on rightness of life. There is no laxity in Theosophy on the necessity of unselfishness, kindness, purity, and spiritually mindedness.

All these coincidences are so definite and beautiful that we are tempted to merge our Christian faith with the Theosophic one, to deny any differences. We are almost ready to claim Theosophy as a brilliant ally. This may be our first instinct, but it is not our second. Words do not always mean the same thing. Even texts may be illegally diverted. And when we take pains to pursue the matter further, we discover that, much as there is admirable in Theosophy, there is also much that

is not so, that its divergencies are more than its coincidences, its sad silences are more than its uttered excellences.

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We must now embark on the consideration of *the peculiar features of Theosophy*, where it strikes out a line of its own, and on which it bases its claim to pre-eminence.

And first, it must be noted that, according to its Founder or Restorer, it does not claim to be a religion at all, but a philosophy. Apparently, it is nothing if it is not scientific. And, certainly, its theories are set forth with the precision of a scientific treatise. Every finding of science is made to fit into the system somewhere, and again and again science is out-scienceed by anticipations of the deepest import. In fact, the whole system is so scientific that we easily lose ourselves along the dizzy paths we are forced to tread, paths where ordinary science certainly has never yet set foot.

The purpose of Theosophy is the worthy one of so developing the spiritual man that he may at length, in the course of ages, attain absolute perfection. All this, it seems, is to be secured by an evolution slow and steady and sure. Beginning at the lowest level, where the Ego is enwrapt in the physical, it is possible to mount up to higher and still higher spheres or planes, each level having its own kind of matter, and its own laws. The higher the level, the purer and higher the spirit. It is the last level, or plane, which brings the spirit to God. Everything in Theosophy is according to law, rigid and exact, the law of cause and effect dominating everything, and prevailing from first to last.

Every man is the architect of his own spiritual fortunes, and, whatever his fate, he has only himself to praise or blame for it. There are potentialities, it seems, latent in all, which, under the pressure of thought and energy, are more and more fully developed. Out of all the experiences of life comes our evolution, according to the way in which we handle these, for they are said to teach us to discriminate between good and evil, to reveal the futility of much that is called pleasure, the

necessity of desiring the best things, and, generally, to develop our better faculties and higher emotions. All this Theosophists sum up in one word, "Karma," for, to them, Karma is "the ultimate law of the universe," working ceaselessly and mysteriously with the materials which man provides in his life. The cause proceeds from man, Karma adjusts the effects on each plane of being, adjusting "wisely, intelligently, and equitably." Just as the law of Karma is the great Adjuster, so is Karma the great retributive power of life in individuals and nations. Karma operates at every stage of the soul's way in life and after it, dealing out its rewards and punishments strictly according to desert. As a law, it is rigid, merciless, and just. Edwin Arnold thus describes it in his "Light of Asia":

"Karma—all that total of a soul,
Which is the things it did, the thoughts it had,
The 'self' it wove with woof of viewless time,
Crossed on the warp invisible of acts.

"It knows not wrath nor pardon; utter—true
Its measures mete, its faultless balance weighs;
Times are as naught, to-morrow it will judge,
Or after many days."

It would seem, however, that one life is too brief for men's spiritual evolution. To secure perfect development he must return again and again to earth, and, in new bodies, gather a fresh crop of experiences. This is the doctrine of *Reincarnation*, common to many religions. With a new personality, the Ego starts on a new round, helped or hampered by the old lives, to try and do better than before. Reincarnation, however, does not immediately succeed death. There is a devachanic rest between, a sort of heaven, where the Ego digests the past, works over again his old experiences, and is secured the opportunity of learning the lessons of his previous existence, before starting on a new lease of earthly life.

I have not attempted to fill up this imperfect outline, for, as all readers of Theosophic books know, the divisions and the subdivisions are numberless, making the tyro's brain reel with their multiplicity and Eastern terminology.

In addition to the Theosophic system proper, there is, as part and parcel of it, a large occult element, sufficiently mysterious to please the most curious minds. Its forces are not physical ones, but psychical and natural, on a plane entirely Eastern and magical. These powers the true Theosophist makes it his business to study and possess, thus enabling him to do many wonderful things, and to see further than ordinary folk. Thus, they boast of having achieved power over "elemental spirits," power to materialize things severely imagined, power to perceive astral bodies. Probably, however, only the initiated and practised Theosophist has succeeded in the greater exploits of the occult world. The rank and file can only stand by, and gape with wonder and hope.

The peculiarity of Theosophy is that it permits no dark places anywhere. It knows everything. It is as much at home in the spirit world as in this. It maps out the future with the utmost precision. It traces out the life-history of a spirit to the utmost detail, computing its periods to within a hundred years or so, without a trace of doubt. The eternal world lies fully spread out before the Theosophic eye. He knows its deep principles, and how the great powers act. He can tell you why each man's spheres, in his many lives, are allotted to him. He reads the very thoughts and emotions of men's inner being, and draws them upon paper, by means of coloured thought—forms which appear to accompany the mingled thoughts of a man's heart. In fact, he will undertake to track a man's way from start to finish, to that great goal when, having absorbed all possible experiences, the spirit enters Nirvana, which, to the Theosophist, is not annihilation, but oneness with God.

There is very little of God in Theosophic philosophy, except in the name. But we have earthly substitutes for Him in the presumed presence amongst men of certain great teachers, who are known as Elder Brothers of Humanity. Adepts, White Brethren, Mahatmas. They do not seem, however, to come much into the open, or to be very free in their intercourse with men. Wrapt in mystery, coming and going with the utmost

secrecy, they would seem to be names rather than realities to the rank and file. Without denying their existence, an outsider may at least express his wonder that so few have ever claimed to see them, or have proved their supernatural wisdom when they did see them.

Such is Theosophy in barest outline, as far as I have succeeded in understanding its tenets, and if reading many books, little and big, and trying to master its more abstruse sides, have given me the right to speak, I claim a small voice, however mistaken.

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But all this is but the ante-chamber to our main theme : "Can a Christian become a Theosophist?" I *had* to give some description of Theosophy as an introduction to my answer if I wished to carry my readers with me. And now, I think, both writer and reader are better prepared to deal with the important question before us.

But let it not be forgotten that one answer has already been given. The Theosophist has given a decided "Yes;" for not only may a Christian, but any other person, of any other faith or unfaith, all may be good Theosophists on the spot.

All this liberality is very taking, and appeals strongly to all liberal souls, but it requires sifting, and must not for a moment be taken at its face value, and for this sufficient reason that it is not true. For when we stay to ask what Theosophists mean by Christianity we are astonished and disgusted to find that their Christianity is not ours, but an esoteric thing buried in the depths somewhere, which, being duly resurrected, is no more Christianity than a scarecrow is a man. It is Christianity with all its essential spirit evaporated out of it.

Now, we ought to have suspected this from the personal bias of Madame Blavatsky against orthodox Christianity. We cannot forget that tell-tale scrap-book, in which she and Colonel Olcott used to paste paragraphs from newspapers, setting forth the frailties and crimes of clergymen and priests who happened to have appeared in the Police Courts, exulting over their falls.

And we are not surprised when we are told that "for clergymen as a body she felt hatred." And when the chosen Founder of the Theosophic faith goes out of her way to denounce "Church Christianity" we wonder with what face her followers can invite Christians to cast in their lot with them, because they may retain their Christianity and remain in their Church, and yet be good Theosophists. The two voices somehow are in discord.

Let us, then, see what a Christian must consent to part with to meet the Theosophic demand.

First of all, he must be prepared to *part with his Personal God*, as all true Christians understand Him. To us He is our Heavenly Father, infinite, absolute, supreme, with a personal love for all His children, and a will and power to bless them.

What say the Theosophists, with Madame Blavatsky as the spokesman?—"We reject the idea of a personal God." "The God of Theology," she declares, "is a bundle of contradictions and a logical impossibility, therefore we will have nothing to do with Him." This is plain speaking, at any rate. The truth is, the Theosophic God is merely the one Infinite Reality underlying all manifestations, but unknown and unknowable by our finite intelligences. There is, they declare, a manifested God who created and sustains the Universe, but He is subordinate and secondary, not supreme.

Then for a Christian to become a Theosophist, he must *part with his Saviour*, the Lord Jesus Christ, as we find Him revealed in the Word of God. It is quite true he is not quite banished from the Theosophic creed, but He is degraded to a quite inferior position. He is no longer Divine in any august and peculiar sense, no longer "the Only-Begotten of the Father." He is divine as we all are divine. Neither is He at all unique in His career. He is just one of many who have advanced from low to high, but not so high, probably, as some of the Adepts who have achieved the highest. He is neither unique in His origin, His nature, or His dignity. He has just risen, as all must do, from frailty and sin to freedom and goodness.

As for being born in Bethlehem, He has been born many times. That was only one of His incarnations.

But the finest Theosophist scorn descends on the *Christian view of the Atonement*. They will have none of it, and the whole cycle of cross and grave, of resurrection and ascension, as accompaniments of an Atonement, they banish with contumely. There is no need of any atonement, and if there were no atonement would prevail. In that sense Christ never could be "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." To them it is all one large travesty of truth, a libel on God and man.

Lest some may think that my version of their tenets is incorrect, I will quote Madame Blavatsky again: "Christians believe in the pardon and remission of all sins. They are promised that, if they only believe in the blood of Christ (an innocent victim!), in the blood offered by Him for the expiation of the sins of the whole world, it will atone for every mortal sin. And we believe neither in vicarious atonement, nor in the possibility of the remission of the smallest sin by any God. What we believe in is strict and impartial justice."

Thus the Saviour is gone, the Gospel of Life is gone, the possibility of forgiveness is gone, all salvation and cleansing and peace with God are gone. Nothing is left but strict law, more rigid and exacting by far than the Law of Moses, law which exacts the uttermost farthing, and in which there is no place for forgiveness or mercy.

And, with the downfall of every foundation truth of our Gospel, faith, the superstructure, goes with it. There is positively nothing distinctively Christian left.

Of course, the pre-eminence of the *Bible*, as the Word of God, disappears. It is but one of many books, no better than the Koran or the Zend-a-Vesta of the Vedas.

And we may not even *pray* with any show of propriety or reason. Here is the question and answer of the Key to Theosophy: "Do you believe in prayer and do you ever pray?" "We do not. We act instead of talking. Why should we? Being well occupied people, we can hardly afford

to lose time in addressing verbal prayers to a pure abstraction. Prayer kills self-reliance."

And what is there left of our *Creeeds*? Nothing! All goes by the board, or if any article is retained it is only a bit of husk, to which nothing of any value attaches.

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Our next course of inquiry is to find out if we can *wherein lie the charm of Theosophy* that it should appeal so convincingly to many? Its attractions must be many to win so large an assent. What are they?

For one thing, it has the welcome feature of *making much of man* and human nature. It tells vain man that he is entirely self-sufficient, being a bit of divinity, and that he is quite capable of working out his spiritual fortunes. He needs information, it is true, but, once possessed of the treasury of Ancient Wisdom, he can run swiftly on his own two legs. Human nature delights in all this, and is only too pleased to believe it.

For another thing, Theosophy leaves *no mysteries* in its philosophy. It will tell you everything you may want to know about the natural history of man—yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow. It will take you through men's cycles from birth to birth, and it can show you his ascents up the spirals of life to its blinding summit. Every secret of man's prison-house is told. And again human nature listens entranced. It is better than fortune-telling or crystal-gazing. Whether it is not all true he does not stay to ask. It is enough that he wishes it to be true. Personally, some of us are thankful *not* to see so much, and prefer the empty socket. But not so the many.

A third claim which Theosophy possesses is found in its *prof-fered solutions of some of life's puzzles*. For it claims to smooth out all life's inequalities in a satisfactory way. It professes to hand over the key to many of life's hardest problems. All lots, they say, are made equal, when spread over a multiplicity of lives. When the ups and downs of man are planed down, or lifted, during the centuries, all will be on one fair level. Claims

are, of course, no proof, and the wishes may be "the father to the thought," pure inventions.

Another of Theosophy's charms for the minds of men is *the occult treasure* they lay at their feet. Man loves mystery, and especially spiritual and other world mysteries. Like Simon Magus, they will spend much to buy occult powers, to add to their self-importance; and when these are offered them by Theosophy we cannot wonder that they should clutch at them. And so they are eager to be initiated into the Theosophic secrets, as men were in earlier days keen to be initiated into Eleusinian, Mithraic, and Egyptian mysteries, to which Theosophy claims to be allied. It attracts men to hear of the exploits of a Madame Blavatsky in the spirit world, to hear of her handling of nature's powers, of her command of the elementals which fill the air, of her materializations, and of her contact with the invisible. They would like to do the same wonderful things, and are ready to pay the price, not realizing that the price is as likely to be as heavy as Faust paid for his powers. Some of us feel that even if those claims should be substantiated, they would be too perilous to possess, and some Theosophists are not backward to declare the same. Besides, to be hand-in-glove with the invisible world is but a poor exchange for the vision which all true Christians possess of seeing Him that is invisible. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

Then, in cataloguing Theosophy's power of appeal, we must not forget *the big gap in some natures which it offers to fill up*. We are thinking of the many irreligious natures, unattached to any faith, sceptical as to all creeds, and therefore empty. And so, when Theosophy comes along with its scientific assumptions, and its palpable assurances concerning the potentialities of human nature, the philosophy just chimes in with their desires and is welcomed. Of course, no true Christian is captivated by it, only the rootless ones, nominally Christians only, who, like dry leaves, go swirling after this thing or that body which happens to rush by fast enough. These are the men and women who spend their poor little lives in catching all the mental and moral

infectious diseases which are about. Probably before long their Theosophy will be dropped with the rest of the "Osophics" they have imbibed in the course of their uneasy lives.

The *appeal of Theosophy's morality* must not be omitted, for its appeal is genuine, the most genuine feature of it. To some who are ignorant of the higher beauties of our Christian morality, it comes with a shock of surprise, as a sort of discovery, as if its high moral teaching were its own speciality. But with all its beauty, it does not even rival the Christian standard, for it lacks the Christian provision of a Christ-model and a Christ-sufficiency. Theosophy bids you scale the moral heights, but stays at the bottom while you try to do it. The religion of Christ adds to its appeal moral life and vigour through a Christ who dwells in our hearts by faith. Theosophy is a sign-post; Christianity is a power; all the difference in the world.

Theosophy seems to appeal to some in *the consolations it offers to the bereaved*. The enormous vogue of books on the subject of the life after death is well known, and any ray of possible light is eagerly welcomed. Here is the charm of spiritualism to many, and Theosophy assumes to be more at home in that world than in this, and pours out all sorts of new revelations on the spirit world. For instance, they tell us that death is such a minor thing, that many who have died scarcely know that they are not still upon earth, and that life goes on in the same humdrum way as it does now, men's destiny being still on the loom, and still in process of development. The dead in the astral world may even come back to earth on transient visits communicating with the living. They can be affected by the abnormal grief of the bereaved, and be even robbed by it of their comforts, or be helped forward by the right attitude of their friends. But all this only in the earlier stages of their life. The future life may be a temporary hell to the evil livers, but sin will be burned out in time, and anyway, there will be plenty of other chances.

There is not much consolation in all this to a Christian mourner. How can there be, when he has got something better?

He does not trust such fabulous satisfactions as these. He prefers to leave much unexplained, resting his soul on the perfect love and wisdom of his Lord. To be "with Christ" is the best heaven, and so "to die is gain." A dropped veil is better far than such a pretended raised one as Theosophists offer. And so to the Christian the appeal falls dead.

I have explained sufficiently, I think, the charm which for some minds Theosophy offers. They are not very solid, and they are far from certain, and when we are invited to surrender to them our vital Christian faith, we can only smile in wonder. We prefer our Christian faith, however exoteric they may call it. We do not want a Christianity with Christ left out, a Cross without a Saviour on it, a God who is nothing but "a great Unknown," a creed with all its articles "blacked out," a future whose map is so different from our Christian one that it looks like another realm altogether.

What is good in Theosophy we already possess. What is new, we have no use for. What it denies, we believe.

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A few facts let me dwell upon in conclusion.

According to the revealed genealogy of Theosophy, it is a revival of the "Ancient Wisdom" taught by philosophy, by mystery, by gnosticism, and by ancient heathendom. But, was it not against these that the early Christian Church fought for its very life? Celsus and Porphyry, Isis and Mithra, and the old Mysteries we have seen in battle array against Christ? Shall we set them on their feet again, and acclaim them as our friends? Neither can we forget a Julian who apostasized from the Christian faith for the sake of this "secret doctrine," brought the pagan gods back, and set them again on their pedestals. But the Nazarene conquered. He died a beaten man.

And so the answer we give to the question, "Can a Christian become a Theosophist?" is clear. He never has, he never can, and he never will. Loyalty to Christ forbids it.

CHARLES COURTENAY.